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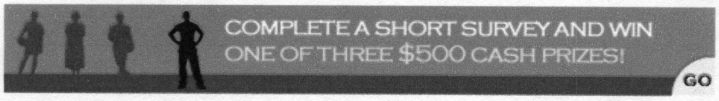

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Out With the Old

By Kevin Savetz
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So you've just upgraded to the latest and greatest server hardware. Or you have replaced your workers' aging PCs with speedy new workstations. Yay. Now: what are you going to do with the old ones?

Often, small businesses don't know what to do with that older hardware, so they shove it into a closet to be dealt with later. If they want to get rid of it, the question remains: who wants this stuff? Should it be recycled, or can it be reused?

These questions are an "increasing problem in small and medium size businesses. A lot of companies have hoarded their hardware — they've had some of it for a very long time," said Bill Pogue, a member of the Information Technology Solution Providers Alliance's (ITSPA) IT committee.

"Most people have heard that schools, churches, and nonprofits will take practically anything," Pogue said, but too-old hardware can do these organizations more harm than good. "You cannot use them as a garbage dump." Pogue suggests that PCs with a 500 MHz Pentium II or slower processor "are not conducive to donating because they can't handle the latest crop of applications." Thanks to grants and donations, many nonprofits and religious organizations are outfitted with modern equipment and applications to run on it. "Hardware from 1992 is pretty difficult to integrate into their environment," he said.

Organizations like Share The Technology can point you to groups in your area that will accept computer hardware. The Information Technology Solution Providers Alliance suggests retaining transfer-of-ownership paperwork proving your company donated the equipment. "If your PC is found in a compromising place — such as a river or dump — and your serial number is identified, your company could be fined," according to the organization's list of PC recycling tips.

Or, you could sell that old equipment. Many businesses sell old hardware to employees, or put it up for auction on eBay — but shipping and other administrative tasks can be a headache. If you donate or sell old PCs, be sure to wipe sensitive data from the hard drives first.

The other option — other than letting the hardware languish in a closet for another decade — is to have the hardware disposed of. Because computer hardware is filled with chemicals that can harm the environment, it shouldn't be just tossed in a dumpster. But paying a company to dismantle the hardware, recycle what it can, and dispose of the rest in a responsible manner can be expensive.

Do research to find a trustworthy company that will do the job properly. There are less-than-reputable companies that don't dismantle hardware as promised: they just throw it away or ship it to a third-world country's junkyard.

Extending the life of hardware by finding someone else who can use it is the better option. Whereas sending your equipment to a recycler costs money, donating it to a school or non-profit can earn you a tax write-off. "It's much more cost effective to donate it than to pay someone to dismantle it," Pogue said.

In addition to how to dispose of hardware, many small businesses should take care to decide when. Pogue suggests that businesses should think about replacing hardware before it has one foot in the grave.

"Most companies should look at how they're going to rotate hardware out. When the warranties begin to drop, when the support from the manufacturer drops — those are signs that they should donate or recycle the hardware," he said. "Do it in a smooth transitional pattern, versus a reactive pattern."

The result will be less expensive and can reduce the sudden impact of hardware migration. As a bonus, this policy can get older hardware in the hands of organizations that can use it before it becomes utterly obsolete.

There are a variety of online resources for recycling computer components. The Electronic Industries Alliance Environment Consumer Education Initiative will point you to electronics reuse and recycling programs in your state. The Environmental Protection Agency's "Where can I take my computer?" page offers a list of organizations that will accept older electronics. Dell, HP, Gateway, and other PC manufacturers have recycling/reuse programs for computers, peripherals, and consumables. Companies may provide rebates on future purchases or other benefits.

To dispose of phones and PDAs, try the CollectiveGood International. It accepts mobile phones, pagers, and PDAs. If the gadget works, the organization will distribute it to a charity, for which you can receive a tax deduction. If not, it will be recycled in an environmentally responsible manner. The Wireless Foundation also recycles used wireless phones to help the environment and raise funds for a variety of charities.

When it comes to ink cartridges and toner containers, Recycle Free accepts used inkjet and toner cartridges. Schools, churches, or other organizations can receive funds in exchange for the spent cartridges. We Buy Empties pays 25 cents to $5 for empty inkjet cartridges, and reimburses for shipping costs.

For disposing batteries, the Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corporation website includes a directory of locations where you can drop off nickel cadmium, nickel metal hydride, lithium ion, and small sealed lead batteries for recycling.

The tide of techno trash will not ebb. Some 20 million PCs become obsolete each year, in addition to 100 million cell phones, 200 million emptied inkjet cartridges, dead batteries, and tons of other high-tech refuse. It is ultimately the responsibility to the businesses that use them to make sure they are disposed of properly.

Kevin Savetz has been a freelance technology writer for 11 years. He was written about small business technology for The Washington Post, Computer Shopper, and The Rotarian. He maintains the FAQ: How Can I Send A Fax From the Internet.

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